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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000978

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SUBJECT: REGIONAL OPPOSITION PARTIES COALESCE FOR LOCAL ELECTIONS

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Classified By: Charge Jonathan Moore for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶11. (C) In preparation for Belarus' upcoming municipal elections, the regional chapters of parties within the opposition United Democratic Forces (UDF) coalition continue to sign cooperation agreements with their Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Gramada" (BSDP) counterparts. Despite enthusiasm for the cooperation agreements among national leaders of the opposition United Civic Party (UCP), the top leadership of UDF partner Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) harbors reservations about UCP's motives. Moreover, following an August 15 meeting between EUR DAS David Kramer and BSDP Deputy Chair Aleksey Korol in Washington, BSDP maintains that the regional agreements will not lead to its formal participation in the UDF without a significant restructuring of the coalition. Regardless, senior BSDP leaders predict that the agreements will demonstrate the seriousness of the Belarusian opposition movement to the international community, especially Russia. End summary.

2006: The Summer of Regional Cooperation

¶12. (C) On August 19, a session of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Gramada" (BSDP) Executive Bureau formally endorsed the regional cooperation agreements between BSDP local chapters and local chapters of member parties of the opposition United Democratic Forces (UDF) coalition as a central feature of BSDP's strategy for Belarus' local elections scheduled for January 14. The endorsement followed such agreements between the local chapters of the BSDP and the United Civic Party (UCP) for joint campaigns in Grodno and Brest on July 19; among BSDP, UCP and the pro-democratic Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) in the northern city of Mogilev on August 1; and between BSDP and BPC chapters in Vitebsk on August 8.

¶13. (C) On August 23, BSDP signed yet another inter-party cooperation agreement with UCP and BPC in the southeastern city of Gomel. Besides expanding BSDP's local election strategy in terms of geography, the Gomel accord also broadened BSDP's base by including the opposition Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) party and non-party organizations, such as the Independent Union of Electronics Industry Workers. Local opposition leaders expressed hope that the Gomel agreement would encourage the national leaders of BPF, UCP, BPC, and BSDP to cooperate. For example, BPF Gomel Chief

Viktor Romanisko told independent media, "we must encourage our national leaders to cooperate, as they do not now the way we would like."

BPF and UCP on the Regional Cooperation Agreements

¶4. (C) The BPF national leadership seems unreceptive to regional cooperation. On August 21, BPF Deputy Head Aleksey Yanukevich told Poloff that BPF regards the tri-partite agreements as "wrong" and an "unfriendly" development. Yanukevich speculated that the regional agreements likely were UCP leader Anatoliy Lebedko's attempt to seize BSDP's party structure and activists for the UCP while BSDP leader and former presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin remains in prison. He insisted that cooperation agreements between BSDP and UDF member parties must be negotiated at the national level by national party leaders.

¶5. (C) In contrast, the UCP national leadership seems enthusiastic about regional cooperation. On September 1, UCP Deputy Chairman Igor Shinkarik told Poloff that the inter-party cooperation agreements were part of UCP efforts to build local level coalitions. In effect, the cooperation agreements render BSDP a party to the UDF so-called Vilnius Initiative agreement, which permits multiple opposition candidates to run in a single constituency as long as they do not criticize each other. Shinkarik confirmed that the UCP supports convening a second congress of opposition parties to restructure the UDF coalition sometime after the January 2007 local elections and thus enable more cooperation between the UDF and BSDP at the national level.

BSDP on Regional Cooperation and Joining UDF

¶6. (C) On August 23, Poloff discussed the regional cooperation agreements with BSDP Deputy Chair Vladimir

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Nistyuk. Nistyuk lauded the accords on the grounds that potential campaign contributors in Russia would regard the opposition as more credible if they see real cooperation. However, Nistyuk told Poloff BSDP participation in the UDF coalition was impossible without a reconfiguration of the coalition and that participating in the coalition would be the "biggest mistake the BSDP could make." Nistyuk insisted that the regional cooperation agreements were separate and distinct from the UDF structure. Nistyuk expressed skepticism about a second opposition congress to restructure the coalition but pledged that BSDP would examine such a plan.

¶7. (C) On September 5, Poloff met with BSDP Deputy Chair Aleksey Korol to discuss his August 15 meeting with EUR DAS David Kramer in the Department. He reiterated to Poloff what he told DAS Kramer about Lebedko's so-called "Four Plus Two" plan to restructure the UDF coalition. (Note: Under Lebedko's proposal, the four UDF parties, BSDP, and Milinkevich's team would form a new national opposition partnership to coordinate opposition activities.) Like Nistyuk, Korol said he would have to examine the plan more closely but did not rule out BSDP's joining with the UDF. Korol also reported to Poloff that he discussed with DAS Kramer a strategy of surrounding the Lukashenko regime with a "circle" formed by the Belarusian opposition, the United States, and Russia. He echoed Nistyuk that Russia would regard the opposition as more serious because of the regional cooperation agreements and therefore as an alternative to Lukashenko as guarantor of its interests in Belarus.

¶8. (C) Poloff asked Korol why the Gomel BPF chapter had signed an agreement with its BSDP, UCP, and BPC counterparts despite reticence among BPF national leaders. Korol replied that the local BPF leaders in Gomel understood their own political realities. That is, Gomel BPF understood that it

is weak in Gomel and UCP is strong. Korol concluded that such realities were the underlying reason for all of the regional agreements.

Comment

¶ 9. (C) Despite Yanukevich's suspicions regarding Lebedko, the BSDP and UCP national leaders appear to be cooperating more closely and actively with each other and with their own regional chapters. We can explain this UCP-BSDP coalescence in part because UCP is the main source of dissent among UDF parties and thus has similar interests with BSDP, which is not a UDF member. Nevertheless, the agreements seem to have contributed to all UDF parties' interest in convening a second congress. Although the congress will likely happen after local elections in January, the overall signals from Korol and even Nistyuk suggest the momentum generated by local elections could catalyze more BSDP cooperation with the UDF coalition at the national level.

Moore